WILLIAM GLACKENS

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AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

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WILLIAM J. GLACKENS

BY

GUY PÈNE DU BOIS

AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

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FOREWORD

THIS *book is one of a series devoted to the work of various American artists and is published by the Whitney Museum of American Art, founded by Gertrude V. Whitney. The purpose of these books, like that of the Museum which sponsors them, is to promote a wider knowledge and appreciation of the best in American art.*

For assistance in preparing this volume for publication, we wish gratefully to acknowledge our indebtedness to the Kraushaar Galleries for information regarding paintings used for illustration, to The Arts *magazine for the loan of its files of photographs, and to the museums and private collectors whose paintings, reproduced in this book, add so notably to the value of the illustrations.*

JULIANA R. FORCE, *Director*
Whitney Museum of American Art

William Glackens

WILLIAM J. GLACKENS

BY

GUY PÈNE DU BOIS

IT is a curious anomaly in William Glackens that the man and the work appear, casually, to be distinct entireties. He is perhaps the simplest and the most modest of the famous American painters. He is a quiet man, reticent, one might at first think, but really economic or shrewd in the expenditure of speech; a man you never know very much better than on the first meeting, though your admiration and liking are sure to grow with the multiplication of meetings. The first word to occur when you place him against the background of other artists—and they do seem a background when you are with him—is disinterest. He is in no even remote sense of the word a politician. He resembles in this as well as in a number of other ways Camille Corot. He is, in other words, the pure type of landscape painter, a pipe smoker, a fisherman, a gourmet and a contemplative spirit; a lover of those quiet pursuits through which peace of mind is permitted to remain intact.

This peace he protects against intrusion by the simple device of being deaf to anything outside a little circle which he has drawn around himself instinctively, perhaps, but with a fraction of deliberation. You may visualize the man moving through the world with his private dream kept inviolate. You will catch glimpses of light amounting almost to ecstasy in his expression. It will not be shared with you. The talk, you realize with a maddening sense of frustration, is consciously or unconsciously directed toward irrelevant matters, toward matters of fact, or there will be none at all. In a group of men he will say less than anyone although the pertinacity of his few clipped remarks, almost whispered, thrown out carelessly, will make the others seem very extravagantly garrulous. These will be philosophic, if you like, but of a purely empirical nature,

built on observation, after rather than before the fact; on proofs, this means, difficultly destroyed.

He will converse much more readily on fishing, restaurants, wine, of which he is a connoisseur, than upon painting. Painting is kept inside the little circle—his deeper feeling about it in any case. One day he listened for hours, in my presence, to a young man's elaborate and rather impertinent discussion of painting without making a single comment. He seemed to be thinking of something else, to be away, to be sitting on a bank fishing. When the impromptu lecturer had gone and I looked toward Glackens, wondering at his patience, he shrugged "But everybody knows that." It seems to me that I have never heard him offer an opinion on art, that most of those he has given have come as replies to questions.

In Paris, after the day's painting, a long day's painting, he would frequently go for an apéritif, a French vermouth usually, to the Café du Dôme. He would then sometimes make comments on the day's work. They would generally be in something of this vein: "How do you paint a hand?" or "When do you know that your picture looks like the sitter —how can you tell?" And then the subject would be, suddenly, changed. The man has no affectations whatever and no consciousness, apparently, of his accomplishment. The good painting is going to be. And though he must, as every painter does, rely a great deal upon past experience and performance he gives you no inkling of its counting with him at all. This picture is better than that one but—wait. "How do you paint a hand?" That statement will sometime be taken as the text of a sermon to be delivered to those graduate painters who, having finished all study, all investigating and armed with a recipe, know exactly how to paint a hand.

Painting should be a series of new adventures: a matter of the continuance of innocence in the approach to any new subject. Glackens has this continued freshness of vision, this vitality in interest to a great degree.

His painting has had two definitely marked periods. These could bluntly be described as the dark and the light period. With the great variety of his interests, with his realization of the full glamour of outdoors he could not stay confined within the barriers of the dark period. Most methods in art are limited. They arrive at one aspect of nature by the sacrifice of another. When they reach for the vibrations of light and atmosphere they destroy the integrity of form; wanting to express the tactile sense they deny the visual one. The possible list of examples of the lifting of one quality at the expense of another in art is formidable. Renoir was the first of the Impressionists to combine the sensations of air and of form, to see that one could not be served at the expense of another, that form without sunlight, if I may be permitted the use of a primitive thought, cannot have any volume; that any valid conception of the richness of nature must include light as well as matter. This all seems so simple that I blush a little in writing it. Renoir's palette, in any case, his enormous researches in the possibilities of color, his final realization of the qualities of light and form in one motive, may be said to have more greatly profited Glackens than the discoveries of any other artist.

Here was a color system which could be put to real service, not a mean little thing haphazardly ordered to show the taste of an aesthetic dawdler in paint, but a piece of machinery, a vocabulary, a medium which permitted the representation or realization of a thing seen with something of the richness with which it filled the eye. There had been no machine comparable to it in the history of painting; comparable to it in scope, in range. Renoir, in simpler words, had built a piano, with a more extensive keyboard, of greater resonance and pliability. It was a thing that Glackens, with his enormous love of nature, his great objective vision, had greatly needed. He was some time discarding the use of the old primitive instrument. The change was made slowly at first, perhaps reluctantly, but until every one of the old instrument's many muddy notes

and the liking for the slumbering sounds they made had got completely out of his system and become definitely abhorrent to him. Then the old machine, still used by so many painters, was done with. He has never played on it since. It must have seemed, after practice on the new one, much as the spinet might to an accomplished manipulator of the modern piano.

It is true that some of us today prefer those simple tunes which can be kept well within the spinet's range. Something has tired a great many of us. These prefer Ravel to Beethoven, Henri Rousseau to Eugene Delacroix. Not a few painters having gazed upon the simplicities of a Modigliani have turned to this figurative spinet. Indeed, the technical and spiritual childishness of the School of Paris has conquered aesthetic dawdlers all over the world. The get rich quick idea, whether in money or other matters, has always been a dangerous one. Its appeal to the lazy is enormous. Its appeal to those tasteful little fellows on the fringe of art, constitutionally unable to work, to drive, to study, is immeasurable. Their decorative little spirits invariably prefer a tasteful arrangement to a living record. Life and nature are really too vulgar to be included in the nicely ordered refinement with which they surround themselves.

To Glackens these two, life and nature, are his sole reasons for painting. He could not stay playing a restricted tune on an instrument which allowed no other. He was forced by every faculty he had, by every temperamental leaning, into the use of a medium which would permit him to express his delight in the movements of crowds, in their character and in the character of their individual units; in these as they appear under sunlight and in the open air; the eternal movement of nature and something, particularly apparent to him, of the quickness, the wittiness of its rhythms. The brown earth colors of the old palette, momentarily muddied more than ever by Whistler and his followers, could help him, in this way of his, very little. The answer came, when it was most needed, in the fulfillment of the powers of the Impressionist color system found

by Renoir. This did away with the chiaroscuro of the old masters, let form be built without the too obvious use of light and shade, without, this means, making the use of color or painting a thing bolstered by and dependent upon drawing methods: a play of light against dark or vice versa; and one invariably accented at the expense of the other.

It is tempting to make a sentimental comparison between the likeness of Baudelaire to Poe and of Glackens to Renoir. Unfortunately the spiritual brotherhood which definitely linked the older pair does not even remotely exist with the younger. They have used the same machine, very much as two musicians might, but the resemblance ends here. The sensuality of the Frenchman which grew until, in his old age, it approached senility, does not in any similar sense exist in the American. Where in the American the rhythm is extraordinarily quick in the other it is long and slow; where one avidly seeks to interpret reality, to get at the root of it by objective study, the other is content to sit in his garden—as he did through all the latter part of his life—trying to make live on canvas his dream of the ideal woman.

II

William Glackens was first noted as a draughtsman in a Philadelphia high school where he would sometimes be called to make drawings on a blackboard before a school assembly. He was later a member of the art staff of Philadelphia Press with Sloan, Luks, Shinn, Preston, Gruber and a few others who were later to become famous as painters or as illustrators. He came to New York in 1896. He was sent by McClure's Magazine to make drawings of the Spanish American War. He was, for a while, a member of the art staff of the New York Herald. His illustrations were then beginning to appear in magazines. They were sensational. Their deviation from the common run of illustrating at that time was so great that they became the subject of many critical essays. Illustration was then in the hands of romantics like Howard Pyle, Max-

field Parrish, Marchand and Arthur I. Keller. Fiction was in the hands of the historical novelists. The world of books definitely removed from our own was one of fancy, of heroes in costumes, of swashbuckling romances. The actual world was going through a childish stage. When the illustrations of Glackens appeared upon this scene the change had already begun here and there in writing. He must have contributed, even among writers, a tremendous push to the budding movement. His notations on the life around him, its character and rhythm, supplemented the writer's documents in a way that few illustrations have ever done. They fulfilled characters and scenes but half drawn in the text, lent color, built form, where it was but faintly suggested. He was one of the leaders in the dismissal of that prudery which more than anything else contributed then to the fear of commentation on daily life. He is, in any event, the father of the present school of illustrating. It is of more than passing interest that none of his followers have ever gone beyond or even approached the acuteness of his observation of life.

It is in this realm that he was first noticed as a painter in America. The wave of realism which began with Courbet and was carried much more convincingly on its way by men like Manet, Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec reached us in the work of Robert Henri, George Luks, John Sloan, Everett Shinn and William Glackens. These men had been together in Philadelphia and inspired by the teaching of Henri who had, at that time, just returned from a long stay in France. With the exhibition, called The Eight Americans, held at the Macbeth Gallery in 1908 these men definitely began the Realist movement in America. Of them all Glackens has more clearly caught the quickness of the rhythm of modern life, the character of its crowds and something, in the larger sense, of the typical nature of its individuals. He has never stopped long over nor dug deeply into, in other words, the individual deviations of types. He is not a critic of life in the way of a Toulouse-Lautrec. He is not intrusive, not curious about things hidden beneath the surface manifestation of character. He

is not of those who would say, like Harry Davis, that life is no place for a gentleman. He is never himself, one is tempted to believe, involved in it at all. But if he sits outside of it observing the parade or watching the stage so crowded with funny, human little people, never the slightest suggestion of aloofness comes from him, no suggestion either of an attempt to transfer actuality, as any escapist might, to a superior dream realm of his own. The thing is accomplished naturally, since he is an individual, but with no conscious effort on his part, no design; despite, indeed, the most multitudinous collection of documents taken from life, of sketchbooks that I have seen made by one painter.

His point of vantage, that disinterest so strongly marked in his personal contacts, must contribute to the pure pleasure taken in the things around him. His subject matter, though I have called him the landscape painter type, is unlimited. From portraiture to still life it includes street, bathing and boating scenes, the entire gamut of things which contribute to the gaiety of the modern scene. He is undoubtedly a portrayer of life's most pleasant occupations, of the picnic spirit. Even his occasional unpeopled landscapes have a festive air, a feeling that nature is in celebration: little clouds race through amazingly blue skies, trees stand pert and independent against a ground itself gaily acclaiming the warmth and clarity and splendour of its friend and patron the sun. Few painters have disliked mystery more than Glackens, nor more actively peered into shadows, been more anxious to be rid of their mysteries, to continue form, to pursue it where it turns into hiding places.

He is a real objective spirit, an observer who, while dealing in generalities, must still go beyond them to those intimacies in color, line and form which are revealed to those of enough perspicacity and patience.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

William James Glackens was born March 13, 1870, in Philadelphia, Pa., where his ancestors of English-Irish and Pennsylvania-Dutch origin, had lived for many generations. After graduating from the Central High School, Philadelphia, he commenced the study of art at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. He inaugurated his career as an artist by drawing illustrations for the *Philadelphia Record*, *Philadelphia Press* and *Philadelphia Public Ledger*. In 1895 he went to Paris, staying there a year and a half and working independently, exhibiting in the Paris Salon, 1890, and in the Paris Exposition, 1900. After his return to America he worked as an illustrator for the *New York Herald*, *New York World* and for various magazines. During the Spanish-American War he was sent to Cuba as an artist on the staff of *McClure's Magazine*. For a number of years he has lived in New York City and has devoted his time exclusively to painting.

His work has been shown in most of the important exhibitions in this country and has been accorded the following awards: Gold Medal for drawing, Pan American Exposition, Buffalo, N. Y., 1901; Silver Medal for painting and Bronze Medal for illustrations, St. Louis Exposition, St. Louis, Mo., 1904; Honorable Mention, International Exposition, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1905; Bronze Medal, Panama Pacific Exposition, San Francisco, Calif., 1915; Temple Gold Medal, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pa., 1914; Second Prize, International Exposition, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pa., 1929.

He is a member of the National Academy of Design (Associate), 1906, Society of American Illustrators, American Society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers, and the Society of Independent Artists.

His work is represented in many private collections and in the following public institutions: Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pa.; Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.; Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Mich.; Met-

ropolitan Museum of Art, New York, N. Y.; Newark Museum Association, Newark, N. J.; Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D. C., and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, N. Y.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

VENCE, 1930

H. 18¼ inches W. 24 inches

Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art

Near La Ciotat, 1928

H. 26 inches W. 32 inches

Beach at Ile Adam, 1927

H. 26 inches W. 32 inches

Flower Piece, 1926

H. 13 inches W. 16 inches

Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art

The Dream Ride, 1923

H. 48 inches W. 54 inches

The Garden, 1918

H. 26 inches W. 32 inches

PROMENADE, 1926

H. 32 inches W. 26 inches

Collection of Detroit Institute of Arts

Café Lafayette, 1914

H. 32 inches W. 26 inches

Head of a Young Girl, 1914

H. 15½ inches W. 13 inches

Child in a Garden. 1914

H. 32 inches W. 26 inches

The Raft, 1913

H. 25 inches W. 30 inches

Collection of The Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pa.

Family Group, 1913

H. 72 inches W. 84 inches

BATHERS, 1913

H. 20½ inches W. 30½ inches

Parade, Washington Square, 1912

H. 26 inches W. 31 inches

Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art

Nude with an Apple, 1910

H. 40 inches W. 57 inches

The Race Track, 1907

H. 26 inches W. 32 inches

Collection of The Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pa.

The Luxembourg Gardens, 1904

H. 23½ inches W. 32 inches

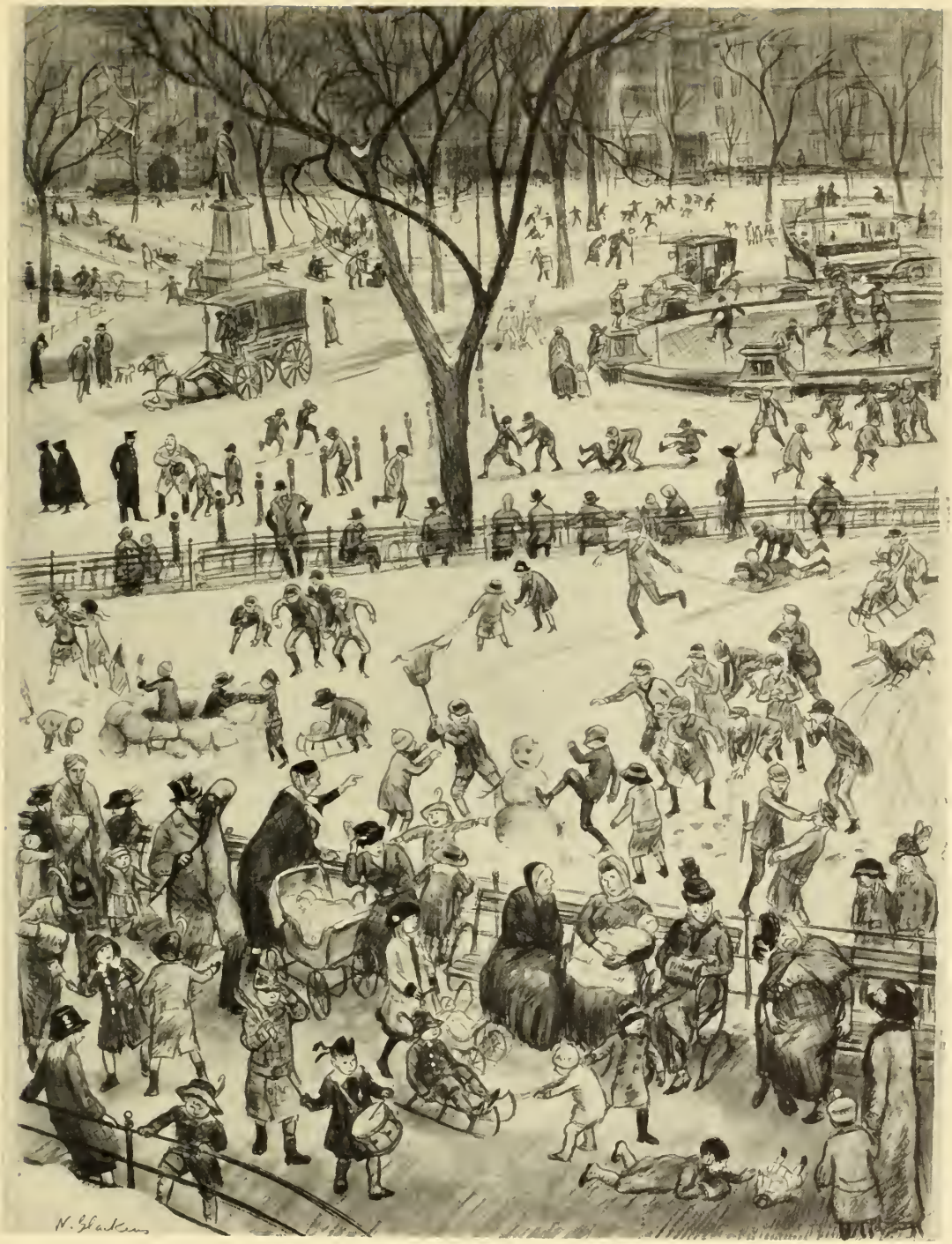
Chez Mouquin, 1905

H. 48 inches W. 39 inches

Collection of Art Institute of Chicago

Holiday in the Park (*Drawing*), 1914

H. 24½ inches W. 18⅛ inches


N. Glackens

Café du Dôme (*Drawing*). 1930

H. 5⅛ inches W. 6¼ inches

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